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Mr. Smith Went to Washington: From Eisenhower to Clinton

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form of extensive direct quotations with connecting paragraphs; what he could not get into the text he has included in numerous appendixes and voluminous (23 full pages) fine print explanatory footnotes. There is much information here, but it is largely undigested. The book lacks synthesis and badly needs the services of a professional editor.

The creation and operation of Scattergood Hostel was an unusual and difficult undertaking. It deserves better than this book.

Mr. Smith Went to Washington: From Eisenhower to Clinton, by Neal Smith. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996. xxiii, 440 pp. Illustrations, index. $29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ALAN JONES, GRINNELL COLLEGE

Congressman Neal Smith's part memoir and part legislative policy manual begins with an account of his Iowa childhood. He was born in 1920 in a house his pioneer great-grandfather built when he came west to Iowa with a "vision of a better future." The book ends with Smith's hope that his grandchildren will have a future in which the instrument of government "can be supported and can be used for the benefit of the whole society." Smith's own generation came of age in the New Deal years, and as a congressman for 36 years (longer than any other Iowa representative) he has helped transmit the vision of his great-grandfather to hopes for his grandchildren.

This a generational book. The first chapter has grandfatherly tales of ponies and oil lamps and dirt roads and corn husking and 4-H clubs in the depressed Iowa of the 1930s when, as Smith says, "there was no talk about government being the enemy." He adds, "I grew up thinking government can be good and that its purpose is to help people." A decorated pilot in the Pacific during World War II, Smith is modestly brief on his war experiences, but he quietly notes that the war years caused him to resolve that he would use his life "to make this a better world."

After the war, Smith used the GI Bill to go to college and law school, and he and his wife, Bea, developed a successful law practice in Des Moines, where he was an active young Democrat building connections with other young Democrats such as Hubert Humphrey. His first campaign for Congress in 1958 was successful, as were all ensuing campaigns until 1994. From the beginning he had a "vision for the Des Moines River Valley," and he began to implement it over the opposition of conservative Des Moines businessmen. Flood control and recreational projects such as Red Rock, Rathbun, and Saylorville attest to the attainment of that early vision.

Smith's second chapter is a forthright account of "working with others in Washington," chiefly presidents from Eisenhower to Clinton. He does not think Eisenhower or Reagan took the job very seriously, preferring golf or afternoon naps. Others, such as Carter and Clinton, mistakenly brought in local staff people who needed time to adjust to Washington and to the legislative process. Lyndon Johnson was the "most competent president ever to handle legislative matters," and Smith identifies with some of Johnson's "Great Society" successes and shares some of Johnson's misperceptions on Vietnam, faulting "liberal Democrats" who did not share his own enthusiasm for Hubert Humphrey in 1968.

Smith became a serious legislator, particularly involved in House Appropriation Committee matters affecting education and agriculture, especially as these related to his Iowa constituency. He recounts his own role in such matters as "set-aside programs," grain and meat inspection bills, the Des Moines Sewer Project, and the development of technology centers at Iowa State University, among others. There are detailed digressions on the legislative and policy process. Over the years Smith became more conservative as he grew closer to powerful congressional leaders, some of whom he characterizes in a later chapter. It is clear that he grew unhappy with recent Democratic Caucus leaders in the House, depicting them as "impractical" and "naive." He worries about both Democrats and Republicans "moving away from the center."

But Smith's major concerns, evident in a last chapter on "Perspectives," are with the recent degradation of the democratic process—the negative advertising of political campaigns (of which he was a victim in 1994), the decline of civility and respect in Newt Gingrich's Congress, the deceit of talk-show hosts and of those "professional liars who hire out to run campaigns." He is disgusted with reckless partisanship, and he regrets the loss of compassion in government and society. There is little bitterness, however, and no regrets about what might have been—other offices or other honors. His long career as Iowa's most effective congressman in the twentieth century is a source of satisfaction. He still views government as a friend, not an enemy, and he concludes: "If we in my generation will fix the fundamental flaws in our political system, if the American people will again work together as one big family, if my grandchildren and their generation do not let skepticism dominate to the exclusion of rationality, and if they maintain the respect and rights necessary to assure greater rather than less freedom as perceived by the authors of the U.S. Constitution, they will enjoy life even more than I have."